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Author: Lindsay Cummings

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Theatre 121 The Politics of Documentary Theatre  
What makes a good essay title?

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**Instructions:**

Review the following list of titles and check the two that you think are the best. One vote goes to the title that is the most interesting or compelling in general. The other vote goes to the title that communicates most clearly what the essay will discuss about Twilight: Los Angeles, 1992. You may vote twice for the same title. Do not vote for your own title.

- ☐ Analyzing Response to the “Twilight Moment” in *Twilight: Los Angeles, 1992*
- ☐ The Enemy
- ☐ Twilight, Police Abuse, and Race
- ☐ Burning Questions: The Symbolism and Effects of the Word “Fire” in *Twilight: Los Angeles, 1992*
- ☐ An Imperfect Balance: Law and Freedom in *Twilight: Los Angeles, 1992*
- ☐ Who You Are
- ☐ Twilight: Victims and Jurors
- ☐ Stuck in Twilight: Static Enemies
- ☐ The Inherent Boundaries and Divides in Los Angeles
- ☐ *Twilight: Los Angeles, 1992*: A War-Like Feeling During the Riot
- ☐ Fear, the Root of all Conflicts
- ☐ Looking for God amidst Devastation: The Function of Religious References in *Twilight: Los Angeles, 1992*

**Evaluating Criteria:**

What influenced your vote? What are the components of a “good” title? List your criteria below.

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Lindsay Cummings

Theatre 121: The Politics of Documentary Theatre

Explanation of Handout: "What makes a good essay title?"

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Based on discussions I have had with other Knight Institute instructors, I know that I am not alone in receiving essays from first-year students with vague, often single-word titles like "Enemies," or "The Role of Stereotypes." These titles convey little about the essay's topic, and their generality fails to provoke a reader's interest (a least it fails to provoke *this* reader's interest).

Although I discuss titles with students early in the semester, usually just before the second essay is due, I found that these discussions had little impact on students' work. I feared that my notes on their drafts and final essays were not helping either. Frankly, I sympathized with their confusion. I have often received comments on my own essay titles that leave me feeling confused or frustrated. While advice that I should make titles "funnier" or "catchier" is at least specific, it is not always a goal I feel capable of achieving. Those examples are outdone, however, by the vague critique to make the title of an essay more "interesting," a comment I have received, and that I confess I am guilty of writing on more than one student's essay.

The handout, "What makes a good essay title?," is designed to allow students to evaluate for themselves what "works" or "doesn't work" in an essay title. To make the handout, I took all the titles from one set of student essays—in this case, essays on the play *Twilight: Los Angeles, 1992*, by Anna Deavere Smith—and instructed students to vote on the best. (The attached sample includes only those titles which students gave me permission to use.) I allowed students to vote for two titles, one that they believed to be the most compelling in general and the other that communicated most clearly what the essay would address in regard to the play. Thus, while the instructions did imply certain characteristics of a good title (that it clearly states a topic and tells the reader what primary text or material it will discuss), I also left room for the students' own judgments and opinions. I told them that they could vote for the same title twice if they felt that one title fit both categories. Finally, students were asked to make notes about how they came to their decisions. They had to determine for themselves "what makes a good title." Once students were done voting and listing the criteria that influenced their vote, we counted the votes by a show of hands and discussed the criteria together as a class.

To use this exercise in your classroom, I recommend recreating the handout using real student titles from a set of essays. The handout is an exercise in comparison and contrast, thus it will work best if the titles range from strong to weak. A title that seems clear and compelling at the top of an essay suddenly looks different to a student when compared to real alternatives. It is also important to list the titles without authors to protect anonymity and limit influences on voting.

In discussion, focus on the positive: what makes the good titles good? The problems with the weaker titles will be implicitly clear without inviting students into the potentially harsh critique of their peers' work that anonymity sometimes invites.

Lindsay Cummings

Theatre 121: The Politics of Documentary Theatre

Sample Student Response: "What makes a good essay title?"

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Since this is a group exercise, I cannot provide a student response. I can, however, summarize the results of the voting and our discussion.

The winner, by a wide margin, was "Looking for God amidst Devastation: The Function of Religious References in *Twilight: Los Angeles, 1992*." Three-quarters of the class voted for this title. Also receiving votes were, "An Imperfect Balance: Law and Freedom in *Twilight: Los Angeles, 1992*," "Stuck in Twilight: Static Enemies," "Burning Questions: The Symbolism and Effects of the Word 'Fire' in *Twilight: Los Angeles, 1992*," and "Twilight, Police Abuse, and Race."

In our discussion, one of the first things students noted was how much they liked the essay titles which included the title of the play. They said that these titles were more informative than the essay titles that did not include the title of the play; these titles provided more context and background. One student who voted for "Stuck in Twilight: Static Enemies" noted that he was not exactly sure what the essay was about, but he was intrigued by the title. Other agreed that there was something provocative and thoughtful about this title.

Other factors influencing students' votes included strong and descriptive language, catchy phrases and word play, and explanations of function or methodology. For example, words like "devastation" and "static" stood out as strong, vivid choices which drew the reader's attention. They thought that "Burning Questions: The Symbolism and Effects of the Word 'Fire' in *Twilight: Los Angeles, 1992*" was a strong title both because of the word play on "burning questions" in an essay about fire, and because the title clearly informed the reader how and in what context the word "fire" would be analyzed.

Finally, students noted that they were drawn to titles that conveyed an "interesting" essay topic—something original, that they had not thought about themselves. This indicated not only the value of a good essay to back up a good title, but also the value of a title that explains specifically the ideas or issues that the essay will address. Overall, students felt that the better titles were the more descriptive or informative ones.